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PP RUEHLMC
DE RUEHYE #1467/01 3551342
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 211342Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6791
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0529
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0482
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 YEREVAN 001467

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [OSCE](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIA: PRESIDENCY STILL UNDECIDED ABOUT IRI
EXIT POLL

REF: YEREVAN 1439

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Although less hostile to the idea of an exit poll during the upcoming presidential election than he was a week ago, Presidential aide Vigen Sargsian still expressed significant concerns about the poll's format and possible fall-out. After being briefed by IRI staff on the poll's technical details, Sargsian repeatedly cautioned that it could become yet another "political tool" of the opposition. On format, the Presidency's major concerns included foreign control over the recruitment of interviewers, lack of government control over polling data, and lack of a legal recourse to dispute the poll's results. Asked whether the poll would be conducted in spite of the Presidency's (possible) opposition, USAID's Mission Director lamented that the poll would not be conducted if the government did not provide sufficient support. Sargsian predicted that either the President or Prime Minister would shortly follow up with the Charge to further discuss the poll. End summary.

IRI BRIEFS PRESIDENCY ON POLL DETAIL

¶2. (C) At the request of the Presidency, the Embassy asked IRI staff to explain the technical details of the proposed exit poll planned for the presidential election in February. On December 19, Michael Druckman of the IRI Washington office, Dr. Rasa Alisauskiene from the Vilnius office of the Gallup organization, and a Yerevan field staffer from IRI joined USAID's Mission Director, Democracy Programs Director, and acting Polchief at the Presidency. This was the second meeting in six days with presidential aide Vigen Sargsian, who on December 13 bitterly expressed his and President Kocharian's opposition and skepticism of the exit poll (reftel).

¶3. (SBU) Fielding Sargsian's rapid-fire delivery of technical questions, Dr. Rasa Alisauskiene from the Vilnius Gallup office assured the Presidency that Gallup had accumulated 16 years of experience in exit polling in the former Soviet Union, and was well qualified to carry out the poll in Armenia, a country whose small size would make the poll even easier to carry out. She referred extensively to an exit poll Gallup had recently carried out in a Kazakhstan presidential election where the exit poll almost exactly mirrored the official reported results. Technical details on

the conduct of the poll follow in paragraph 12 below.

LITANY OF OUTSTANDING CONCERNS

¶4. (C) Stressing that Armenia is a "young democracy" where election-day provocations can be destabilizing, Sargsian repeatedly cautioned that the exit poll could become a "political tool" of the opposition to claim vote fraud after the election. When USAID's Democracy Programs Director reminded him that these claims would occur regardless, Sargsian shot back that the poll would give the opposition "yet another tool" to support their claims. He said he was certain that two-three of the candidates were already planning to dispute the election results and engage in provocative activities.

¶5. (C) In a political culture where "nobody wants to lose" and "losers always accuse the election winner" of vote fraud, Sargsian pointedly conveyed President Kocharian's caution that "we do not want tension" after the elections. Sargsian fretted that since we will not have control over the exit poll, it risks being manipulated by the opposition to create provocations and instability.

¶6. (C) Sargsian also expressed concern over foreign control of the recruitment of polling personnel, and lack of control over verification of data, as well as its transmission, tabulation and analysis by the Gallup office in Vilnius. Dr. Alisauskiene stressed that the Armenian Sociological Association (ASA) would be involved in the recruitment process, but not more, in order to avoid misperceptions of interference with the collected data. She assured that the

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data will be handled carefully and properly, and iterated that "we are not biased because we are not Armenians."

¶7. (C) Sargsian also found it problematic that Gallup could not share polling data broken down by voting precinct, an area he said could result in accusations of vote fraud. Citing again the specter of election-related instability, he rhetorically asked Dr. Alisauskiene "How can the government respond" to voters from a certain precinct who overwhelmingly voted for the losing candidate? He also stressed that foreigners' analysis of the collected data could be viewed as outside interference in Armenian affairs, and provide another point of contention for disenchanted, muck-raking opponents.

¶8. (C) Sargsian continued his litany of concerns by pointing to the fact that an exit poll's results could not be verifiable or legally contested in court, in comparison with a parallel vote count. In fact, he wondered out loud why USAID, which has sponsored such counts in many other places, chose an exit poll) a "political tool") instead. The Mission USAID Director answered that he had never heard an exit poll referred to as a "political tool" before, and such exit polls in the former Soviet Union had not proven controversial before, so he was unsure why Armenia's government would be so concerned about one now.

¶9. (C) Obliquely referring to an unforeseen impact on U.S. democracy assistance programs in Armenia, Sargsian asked whether the U.S. Mission would go ahead with the poll even if President Kocharian were to oppose it. USAID's Mission Director answered that the Mission hoped to avoid such an outcome, but if the government would not provide sufficient support for the idea in general, and in particular security for polling personnel, the Mission would not go ahead with the poll. Sargsian laughed off the reference to the security issue, saying "we would not hunt" the pollsters down.

¶10. (C) Sargsian also raised his concerns about the short timeframe left before the election with which to train the interviewers, and the other exit poll offers that the

Presidency had received since the Mission announced its poll. Dr. Alisauskiene assured him that the timing was fine, given the fact she has been working in Armenia the last six months) on other IRI social and political surveys) and had her organization up and running already. Sargsian said they were "concerned" by the fact they had competing offers of exit polls, and the "confusion" that overlapping polls would create at election time. In defense of his point, he cited the importance of "vote secrecy" highlighted in the report on the May, 2007 parliamentary elections which the Organization for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) issued this past September.

CONFLICTING REPORTS ON WHO SUPPORTS EXIT POLL

¶11. (SBU) Articles in a major opposition newspaper today commented that several leading opposition parties oppose the poll on the basis that pro-government sociologists would be involved in carrying it out. (Note: ASA has been alternatively portrayed as pro-government and pro-opposition in the past, so it is hard to know where the truth lies. End note.) But IRI told us the opposite this afternoon at an Embassy debrief) that in its meetings this week with the leaders of key pro-government and opposition political parties to share the latest IRI opinion survey results, almost all expressed favor of the exit poll.

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF EXIT POLL

¶12. (SBU) Technical details, as provided by the Gallup organization regarding the conduct of the exit poll, follow.

CONDUCT OF POLLING:

- A standard exit poll methodology would be used;
- Polling stations would be selected from CEC list;
- Stations would offer representative sample (urban/rural);
- Pollers would work in pairs, or larger, based on size of polling station;

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- Pollers would be located 10-50 meters from station, or whatever permitted by Armenian law;
- Pollers would choose every second person exiting the station to interview;
- Pollers would identify themselves clearly as "Gallup" organization personnel; all paper materials (questionnaire, list of presidential list of candidates) would have "Gallup" clearly marked on them;
- No personal information (name, address, etc) would be asked;
- People would be asked only how they voted, ie, for which candidate;
- Gender and age information would also be collected, with people having the option of telling which age bracket (ie, 30-40, 40-50, etc) they fall in rather than specifying their exact age;
- People can refuse to be interviewed, and that data is also collected, with efforts by pollers to collect at least gender and age for such voters.

TRANSFER, CONTROL, AND DISSEMINATION OF POLLING DATA:

- Polling data would be transmitted directly by individual interviewers to the Vilnius Gallup office by cell phone, to provide for real time updates;
- Data would be transmitted after each 5-10 interviews. Pollers do not count their data, they merely transmit what interview 1, 2, 3, etc, responded;
- Interviewers would be supervised by regional supervisors, at the ration of 1 supervisor for every 20 interviewers;
- Supervision would take the form of supervisors driving around the day of the elections to observe the interviewers' conduct (interviewing, data collection, and data transfer);
- Data is sent to Vilnius to avoid tampering of data inside the country, as is the standard practice in such polls;
- Gallup personnel collect and analyze the data in Vilnius, and then release the results the same day, but not earlier than 8:30 pm local time, or a time specified by Armenian law;
- Gallup releases the results by electronic means, mainly over the Internet, and through staff in Armenia. A press conference can be used to announce the results, depending on prior agreement with the country, and in accordance with Armenian law.

SELECTION OF SUPERVISORS AND INTERVIEWERS:

- Selection of polling staff) both supervisors and interviewers) would begin in January after the holidays;
- Supervisors and interviewers would be Armenian;
- 500-600 supervisors and interviewers will be selected;
- Gallup staff, as well as Armenians with polling expertise, would select the supervisors and interviewers. Armenian recruiters will come from Gallup's local partner, the Armenian Sociological Association (ASA). ASA will not/not have any role in the collection, transfer, or analysis of the polling data;
- Supervisor and interviewers will preferably have polling experience, have a sociology background, or come from academia. Many will be university students. No public announcements are issued to recruit supervisor or interviewer. Process is conducted quietly and informally;
- The selection process tries to ensure that neither supervisor nor interviewer is affiliated with political parties. Both are paid for their work.

TRAINING OF SUPERVISORS AND INTERVIEWERS:

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- After the selection process, polling personnel are trained and then undergo a pilot exercise in Yerevan, cities, rural areas and villages that simulates election day.
- The goal of the training is to observe whether polling personnel can conduct their work in a neutral, cordial, and professional manner;
- Gallup notifies polling personnel of their polling stations only 1-2 days prior to the election, on/around February 17.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) While it was encouraging to see a more flexible attitude in the Presidency, the lingering number of concerns still suggest we are a ways off before this issue is resolved. Some of these concerns look disingenuous to us, to say the least. That said, it is already well known throughout the political establishment here that the exit poll has been proposed to, and publicly blessed by Prime Minister Sargsian. It appears that its fate now depends on how the Presidency and the Prime Minister's office reconcile their conflicting views, and the way in which they present them to the public in the event the President's opposition trumps the PM's views. END COMMENT.

PENNINGTON